DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 138 190 HE 008 855

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TITLE Beyond Graduation: The Educational and Employment Experiences of an Effective Studies Degree Program.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, April, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Graduates; Comparative Analysis; *Employment; *Experimental Programs; Followup Studies; *Graduate Study; Graduate Surveys; Higher Education; Institutional Research; Job Satisfaction; Liberal Arts; Nonformal Education; Professional Education; Research Projects; *Special Degree Programs; State Universities; *Student Opinion; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS Bachelor of Elected Studies; University of Minnesota

ABSTRACT

Described here is the followup study of the educational and employment experiences of the graduates of a nontraditional degree program that allows students to design their own four-year programs. Graduates of the experimental Bachelor of Elected Studies (BES) program at the University of Minnesota are compared with regular liberal arts graduates on these bases. Results show that the groups are similar in their employment experiences and in their feelings about these experiences. In addition, there are virtually no differences between the groups in their participation in informal educational activities since graduation. However, there are differences in the groups' formal education since graduation and in their feelings about their undergraduate education. Regular liberal arts graduates are more likely to have attended graduate or professional school. BES graduates are consistently more positive in their evaluations of the various aspects of their undergraduate education. (Author/MSE)

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ED138190

Beyond Graduation: The Educational and Employment Experiences of Graduates of an Elective Studies Degree Program

by

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Session 6.17
Curriculum Evaluation
II: Organization (EVA)
Critique Division B

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Abstract

This paper describes a follow-up study of the educational and employment experiences of the graduates of a non-traditional degree program which allows students to design their own four year program. Graduates of the experimental Bachelor of Elected Studies (BES) degree program at the University of Minnesota are compared with regular liberal arts graduates in terms of their educational and employment experiences after graduation. Results show that both groups of graduates are very similar in their employment experiences and in their attitudes about these experiences. In addition, there are virtually no differences between the two groups in terms of their participation in informal educational activities since graduation. There are differences, however, between BES and regular liberal arts graduates in terms of their educational experiences since graduation and in terms of their attitudes toward their undergraduate education. Regular liberal arts graduates are more likely to have attended graduate or professional school. BES graduates are consistently more positive in their evaluations of the various aspects of their undergraduate education.

Beyond Graduation: The Educational and Employment Experiences of Graduates of an Elective Studies Degree Program*

As most of you probably realize, the old college campus ain't what it used to be. The past decade or so has seen the addition of many types of non-traditional degree programs to the traditional, time-honored college offerings. One type of non-traditional degree program, and the kind of degree program that I am going to talk about here today, is the elective studies degree. The elective studies degree goes under a wide variety of other names depending on what particular college or university you're talking about (e.g., Bachelor of General Studies, Bachelor of University Studies, Experimental Bachelor's Degree, etc.). The elective studies degree program is usually located within the traditional university setting but its students are allowed to design their own programs and typically do not have to fulfill the usual English, language, distribution, and major requirements. This particular type of degree program is becoming increasingly popular. For example, in 1973 a survey of over 650 colleges and universities in the U.S. found that 17% of the universities, 14% of the four year colleges, and 5% of the two year colleges had such individualized dgrees with no course requirements.

An elective studies program known as BES (Bachelor of Elected Studies) began, somewhat stormily, at the University of Minnesota in 1972. Its arrival was not without controversy; both the program's supporters and detractors wanted proof of either its miraculous power to cure most of the problems plaguing the concept of "liberal education" or its insidious power to destroy the very principles of "liberal education". Our paper today comes out of that controversy and attempts to answer some of the questions about elective studies prog-

rams. We will compare the employment and educational experiences of the graduates of an elective studies degree program with the experiences of a comparison group of regular liberal arts graduates.

Method

From 1972 to 1975, approximately 2,300 students were admitted into the BES program; approximately 400 of these 2,300 have graduated with a BES degree. We followed up all 400 of these BES graduates and compared them with 400 regular liberal arts graduates. We made sure that the two groups were comparable in terms of date of graduation. For example, if 23 BES students graduated in winter of 1974, we randomly selected 23 regular liberal arts graduates who also graduated in winter of 1974.

We used mailed questionnaires (comprised of multiple choice and open-ended items) to gather all of the information about the two groups of graduates. The questionnaires asked the graduates about their educational and employment experiences since graduation (e.g., "Have you attended graduate or professional school since you received your undergraduate degree?"), about the usefulness of their undergraduate education (e.g.,"If you are currently working, how well did your University experience prepare you for your present job?"), and about their general satisfaction with the University of Minnesota and their undergraduate degree(e.g., "In general, considering all aspects of the University, how dissatisfied or satisfied are you with your undergraduate education at the University?").

Since we were somewhat concerned about the possibility of a low response rate, we used follow-up reminders and some local telephone calls to coax, coddle, and wheedle forgetful or recalcitrant graduates. A total of 311 (77%) of the BES graduates and 267 (66%) of the regular liberal arts graduates returned their

completed questionnaires.

Descriptive statistics (such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were calculated for both groups of graduates. Chi square and t tests were used to compare the responses of the BES and regular liberal arts graduates.

Results and Discussion

Attendance at graduate/professional school

The major finding under this heading is that a significantly higher percentage of liberal arts graduates than BES graduates report planning to attend (54% vs. 44%) and actually attending (40% vs. 30%) graduate school. We're not sure why higher numbers of our regular liberal arts graduates are attracted to graduate or professional school. It may be a temporary difference which would disappear if another follow-up study were done at a later date, it may be a difference in the types of students in each degree program (e.g., BES graduates have slightly lower high school and college grade point averages and test data), and/or it may, in fact, be a result of being in the two different degree programs. In any case, we found no evidence that graduate and professional schools discriminated against BES graduates. A total of 106 BES graduates and 122 regular liberal arts graduates applied to graduate or professional school. Approximately equal percentages of each group were accepted into school.

Participation in informal educational activities

We thought that whereas BES students might be less likely to attend a traditional graduate/professional school program, they might be more likely to continue their education in less traditional and more informal ways. Examples of some of these less formal activities that we felt were educational were: "Taken adult community education courses", "Traveled to a foreign country",

"Political activities", and "Creative writing". Our findings did not support our hunch. Whereas substantial numbers of both groups have participated in these informal educational activities, BES graduates are no more likely than regular liberal arts graduates to do so.

Employment experiences since graduation

In general, the BES and regular liberal arts graduates seem to have very similar employment experiences and attitudes about these experiences. The two groups of graduates are very similar in the amount of time they have been unemployed since graduation, in the number of part time jobs they held since graduation, in the amount of time they've been employed in their current job, and in the amount of satisfaction they say they have on their current job. There are also no real differences between BES and regular liberal arts graduates in terms of their current employment status (e.g., unemployed and looking for work, unemployed and not looking for work, working full time at a job requiring a college degree, working part time at a job not requiring a college degree, etc.). Still more evidence of the lack of differences between the two groups is found in the types of jobs the two groups of graduates have (e.g., professional, managerial, clerical, skilled trades, unskilled trades, etc.); both groups of graduates report having similar kinds of jobs.

However, all is not as cut and dried as it might first appear. Some differences in the employment experiences of BES and regular liberal arts graduates do exist. BES graduates report holding a smaller number of full time jobs since graduation and are more likely to feel that the University has done a good job of preparing them for their current job.

Overall, there are more similarities than differences between BES and regular liberal arts graduates as far as their post graduation, employment experiences are concerned. In addition, BES graduates do not report any major difficulties from

their potential employers because of their elective studies degree. These findings are encouraging for the advocates of BES-type degree programs and should help to put to rest any fears about the value of such an untraditional degree in what is forever being called the "real world of work". Although one could argue that preparation for a career is not a liberal arts goal, we contend that the importance of a satisfactory job after graduation from college cannot be denied. It would seem from our findings that BES graduates are just as likely as regular liberal arts graduates to find such jobs.

Reflections on University experiences and learning

BES graduates, overall, tend to be more satisfied with their undergraduate university experiences. They rate their level of satisfaction higher, they report having more goals fulfilled, and report learning more while they were in school, both academically and about themselves personally.

Final conclusions

Two cautions should be noted at this point. Firstly, we have done a short term follow-up of our two groups of graduates; the longest any of our graduates have been out of college is three years. Follow-up studies done at some future point in time may show results different than those we have presented here.

Secondly, our findings alone cannot prove that the BES or regular liberal arts program caused any differences in the educational and occupational experiences of their graduates. Since both the BES and regular liberal arts graduates chose to enter their respective degree programs, it may well be the case that the two groups of students were very different from each other to start with. Other correlational and experimental studies are needed to tease out the effects, if any, of elective studies programs. Results from this study, however, lead us to conclude that BES graduates compare quite well to regular liberal arts graduates on most variables concerning short term, post graduation educational and

employment experiences.

Summary

Relatively little systematic research has been done on the graduates of non-traditional degree programs. The results of our study at the University of Minnesota give some information on the recent graduates of an elective studies program at a large midwestern university. Here is a brief summary of our major findings:

(1) A higher percentage of regular liberal arts graduates report planning to attend and actually attending graduate or professional school since graduation.

(2) Equal acceptance of BES and regular liberal arts graduates to graduate and professional school leads us to believe that possession of a BES degree does not adversely affect admission to graduate or professional school.

(3) There are more similarities than differences between BES and regular liberal arts graduates as far as their post graduation employment experiences are concerned. Those differences that do exist tend to favor BES graduates.

(4) There are no differences between the two groups in terms of their participation in 13 informal educational activities.

(5) Although both groups of graduates tend to be satisfied with their University experiences, BES graduates are notably more satisfied with their undergraduate education.

Footnotes

* For a more complete description of the study and a complete list of references and reference notes, refer to: Robinson, B.E. & Hendel, D.D. Beyond graduation: The educational and employment experiences of graduates of an elective studies degree program. Research In Higher Education, (in press).